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Narratives of *Southern Constellations*. Cultural diplomacy and artistic exchanges within the Non-Aligned Movement**

Abstract: The purpose of my paper consists in understanding the transnational artistic exchange within the Non-Aligned Movement as a cultural tool for strengthening the cohesion between its member-states and aggregating alternative discourses to the two (Soviet and American) dominant ones during the Cold War era. Thus, I use the framing theoretical perspective specific to social movements studies, in order to highlight the connections between art and political solidarity through the analysis of the exhibition “Southern Constellations. The Poetics of the Non-Aligned” that took place in 2019 in Ljubljana. From a methodological point of view, my analysis of cultural exchanges between non-aligned countries is set up within a frame narrative – a narrative within a narrative. What I am particularly interested in is not so much the description of the cultural diplomacy in the context of the Non-Aligned Movement *per se*, but rather how the story of those events is told almost thirty years after the formal breakup of Yugoslavia. In the end, I try to argue that the international artistic exchanges contributed decisively to the creation and use of new meanings and narratives that eventually generated frame resonance in terms of geo-political strategies.

Keywords: Artistic exchanges, cultural diplomacy, frame resonance, frame narrative, the Non-Aligned Movement, Yugoslavia.

1. Introduction

The Cold War era is particularly known for the geo-political and ideological dichotomy between the Soviet and the American blocks. The tensions between them had implications on a large part of the globe, and generated a relatively complex system of alliances and partnerships. However, not all states were happy with this world order. Those that decided to stay neutral formed their own system of alliances and partnerships called the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

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Born in 1961, at the highest pick of the animosities between East and West which culminated one year later with the Cuban Missile Crisis, the NAM struggled to represent the common interests of those states from South-East Asia, Africa, Latin America (and even Europe), the Southern hemisphere, on their path to decolonization. In 1961, at the Belgrade Summit, the five initiators of the movement (the Yugoslav president Josip Tito, the Egyptian president Gamal Nasser, the Indian prime-minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah and the Indonesian president Sukarno) met for the first time within the formal political context of the Non-Aligned Movement in order to set up the agenda of their cooperation. Nevertheless, the origins of the movement can be traced back ten years prior to the first NAM summit. In 1951, African and Asian states met at the Bandung Conference, in Indonesia, to discuss the necessity to cooperate and support each other against colonialism and imperialism, by declaring their neutrality towards the two main power blocks.

After the first NAM conference organized in 1961, the participants left with mixed feelings and almost unsatisfied with the discussions. Soon after, they agreed that a second conference was imperative and that more Southern countries should join the movement. The Soviet Union expressed its support both for the movement and for the idea of a second, more encompassing conference (History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive 1964). Step by step, NAM increased the number of its members from all continents and became the second largest organization in terms of membership after the United Nations.

The non-aligned foreign policy of the member states had not only a geopolitical dimension, but it was also a “state of mind”, as Gopal puts it. “It was the natural expression of peoples who were again raising their voice after many years of suppression” (Gopal 1976, 4), who were genuinely convinced that they would be able to find their own path without interfering with their former colonists. The creation of NAM had two main reasons: a) a reactive one in respect especially to the European powers who had controlled for centuries largest parts of the world – this explains why Soviet Union sympathized with the idea of a third geo-political configuration that would diminish the number of future possible allies of the Western world; b) a proactive one – the NAM countries decided to cooperate because by being together they were hoping to support each other during the long and sometimes violent processes of achieving their autonomy and independence. At the same time, they were all in search of an identity, symbols and rituals that could express their true inner self as nations. All these newly formed nations were convinced that by sharing a common past of oppression and colonialism they would easily achieve consensus within the movement. This explains why this movement did not get a formal institutional

expression, permanent structures and voting procedures other than the consensus until the '90s. In the end, their reluctance to create permanent institutions was an understandable reaction caused by the fear of new forms of domination and oppression. Unfortunately, the conference system - based on summits organized every three years - failed to strengthen their ties. After the Havana Summit in 1979, J. Graham noticed: "[...] the NAM has remained an essentially amorphous group, struggling to surmount its own internal differences and quarrels in order to promote consensual concerns" (Graham 1980, 153).

Nevertheless, during the Cold War era, NAM behaved rather as a social movement and less as an international organization like, for instance, the United Nations. It encompassed states, political leaders and diplomats that manifested their shared disapproval toward the antagonistic political order - between East and West -, stood up together and took a collective stance on political matters such as anti-colonialism, self-determination of peoples, respect for sovereignty and mutual support. All these elements became part of the movement *per se* and shaped its distinct identity, despite the geographical and sometimes political heterogeneity of its members (Dinkel 2018, 13-14).

From the very beginning, Yugoslavia played a major part in the organization of the movement. The fact that the first conference was hosted by Tito in Belgrade reflects the openness of the political regime towards the developing countries in the Southern Hemisphere and its willingness to stand aside from the political rivalries between the European super-powers, as well as to find new partners with similar views on domestic governance and foreign policy. Even though it did not have a colonial past, nor was it confronted with an imminent threat like other leading countries of the movement, Yugoslavia joined it because it was afraid that the European rivalries might jeopardize its independence. Moreover, its socialist regime - distinct from the Soviet one - did find some echoes in the socialist regimes of the Southern developing countries (Stojanovic 1981, 445-446). Thus, by playing an active role within the movement, it became one of its leading voices in the '60s and '70s, something it could have never dreamt of after the End of the Second World War. In just twenty years, from the isolated state it once was, Yugoslavia became a central power within the NAM. Its socio-economic policy based on workers' self-management, as well as its initiatives at the United Nations on sanctioning the acts of aggression, defining the diplomatic laws and creating the premises for the doctrine of peaceful coexistence increased its visibility and influence.

The Yugoslav efforts to strengthen the relations between the NAM countries covered many areas from strategic partnerships, political and economic alliances to cultural diplomacy. More precisely, cultural diplomacy through art transformed the heterogeneity of the NAM members into an

asset for promoting cohesion and self-awareness among them. After its expulsion from Cominform, that took place in June 1948, Tito needed to present himself as the leader of a country whose economy, industry and culture were flourishing far away from the Soviet influence. The Yugoslav propaganda was portraying the country as the land of the “multinational and multicultural community” (Ugresic 1994, 26), a “*terra vergine*” where socialism and consumerism were making a perfect couple (Zimmermann 2016). This idyllic picture of Yugoslavia was immediately transferred into a foreign policy vision that a future possible program for NAM that would transform it into in an international peaceful community where aggression, neocolonialism and imperialism no longer existed. Art decisively contributed to the dissemination of these ideas through cultural exchanges with the Western world (Unterkofler 2018), as well as with the communist or non-aligned ones.

This paper seeks to understand the nature and the means of cultural exchanges between Yugoslavia and the other non-aligned countries through the lens of an exhibition that took place in 2019 (7 March - 31 August) in Ljubljana, “Southern Constellations. The Poetics of the Non-Aligned” that focused precisely on this topic. By placing it in a new context, in which Yugoslavia no longer exists, the exhibition seeks to explore the possible contemporaneity of the NAM. Thus, from a methodological point of view, my interpretation of the cultural and artistic exchanges between Yugoslavia and other non-aligned countries will be filtered through the frame narrative perspective – a story within a story. At the same time, by using the conceptual tools provided by framing theory– as a social movement’s theory – I try to argue that artistic exchanges between Yugoslavia and the rest of the non-aligned countries generated narrative frames that consolidated their political cohesion.

2. Theoretical framework

Frames are structures that help individuals and groups to detect and understand occurrences from their private and collective experience both individually and as members of collectivities. They have the role of encoding and decoding experience. Simply put, they are packages of meaning (Jasper 2007, 76) and thus, collective action frames express the specificities of the group, its values, norms and environment, based on collective identity (Gamson 2015). In this respect, the framing perspective (Gamson and Meyer 1996) within the discipline concerned with the study of social movements offers a complex insight into how a member of community (an individual or even a state) perceives, presents him/herself to the rest of the society and how they determine the coagulation and the

spread of these frames within society. According to Benford and Snow, frames are

action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization. [...] [They] are constructed in part as movement adherents negotiate a shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge other to act in concert to affect change. (Benford and Snow 2000, 614-615)

Framing processes may comprise simultaneously or separately three dimensions: one which provides the evaluation of reality as diagnostic, another which provides solutions and a third one which motivates and mobilize the actor based on the previous two assumptions. Differently put, diagnostic framing refers to the way the movement depicts its issues and detects the responsible agents for the situation they intend to change, whilst prognostic framing, which usually follows the diagnostic one, proposes an action plan to solve the encountered problem. Motivational framing addresses the construction of narratives that help members to bond and bystanders to join the movement. It is a mandatory task for the engaging and mobilizing processes (Benford and Snow 2000, 615-618).

Frames are symbolically constructed in order to produce frame resonance, that is a set of meanings that coincide with others' meanings and understandings (Snow and Benford 1988). Movements must define their boundaries and frames within an ideological and social structure framework (Oliver and Johnston, 2000; Veigh et al. 2004) for its members to act together. Each narrative can become a framing narrative for another narrative by simply containing it. "Framing narratives can, and often do, play a vital role in the narratives they frame" (Porter Abbott 2008, 29). In the case of my paper, the exhibition organized in Ljubljana becomes a framing narrative for the narrative of the artistic exchanges between Yugoslavia and the other non-aligned fellow states during the Cold War era.

3. *Southern Constellations*. A "Russian doll"-type narrative

The exhibition "Southern Constellations: The Poetics of the Non-Aligned" was one of the many activities within a two-years collaborative project New Mappings of Europe, under the coordination of several cultural and artistic institutions from Serbia, Slovenia, United Kingdom and Austria. The project program comprised several exhibitions, a conference on the contemporaneity of the NAM, artistic residences and several other educational and community lunches (New Mappings of Europe 2019a). The exhibition hosted by the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova,

Ljubljana, was curated by Bojana Piškur, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana whose research was focused on the NAM, the artistic Yugoslav post-avantgarde and the artistic exchanges between Yugoslavia and Latin America. More than twenty artists and artistic associations from all over the world were invited to exhibit their work. The heterogeneity of the artists who exhibited their creations and their diverse geographical provenance reflect the heterogeneity of the non-aligned states.

The title of the exhibition is a metaphor for the past struggles and misfortunes of many southern states of the globe who stood up against their oppressors and created their own independent forums of cooperation. At least from this point of view, they are like the astronomical constellations which are celestial configurations grouped around bright stars, especially noticeable during the night. In a world dominated by two bright stars, the Soviet Union and the United States, who would have hoped to reach a similar status? And, consequently, which were the bright stars of the southern constellations? The answer lies in a mixture of geo-political influence and national self-awareness and conscience. From the point of view of the curator, Bojana Piškur, Yugoslavia was one of those bright stars that consolidated its influence within the movement by using, among others, ideological and symbolic instruments through cultural exchanges.

Even though the texts of the catalogue barely suggest the propagandistic display of the Yugoslav greatness at that time, it is obvious that the cultural and artistic exchanges initiated by Tito were intended to exert what Joseph Nye calls “soft power”. According to Nye, soft power is “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideas, and policies“ (Nye 2005, X). Tito understood that by creating (and being part of) a movement whose members would share the same vision of a world that protects the sovereignty of the states, his international influence would increase.

Art was one of those fields in which Tito invested many national resources – artists, money, domestic and diplomatic political structures. Teja Merhar’s text on the relationship between Yugoslavia and the member states of NAM (Merhar 2019, 43-72) reveals an impressive number of cultural conventions signed with representatives from all continents. The golden age of these conventions was the ‘60s and the ‘70s. They continued during the eighth decade of the last century, but not with the same intensity as during the previous ones. Even though the author does not offer an explanation for the artistic rush from the ‘60s and ‘70s, in my opinion it is related to Tito himself and his foreign policy. Tito died in May 1980, and as in the case of most dictatorships, the spark of the political regime, at least in the way the deceased leader envisaged it, started fading. Another revealing

aspect of these cultural cooperation is, from my perspective, the coincidence between the Yugoslav artistic exhibitions and the NAM conferences or Tito's visits. Even though the author refers to coincidences, this seems rather a deliberative action. From the large list of cultural conventions and exchanges that Merhar could find in the archives, four of them bear the sign of this strange "coincidence": a) in Brazil, in 1963, the Yugoslav exhibition coincides with Tito's visit; b) in United Arab Republic (Egypt), in 1964, the Yugoslav exhibition coincides with the 2nd NAM conference; c) in Sri Lanka, in 1976, the Yugoslav exhibition coincides with the 5th NAM conference; d) in Cuba, in 1979, the Yugoslav exhibition is planned to coincide with the 6th NAM conference, but the archives fail to confirm that it really happened.

Why was art so important for the cohesion of NAM members and implicitly, for Tito? First, even though NAM was born as a political movement, it soon covered many different areas of cooperation, from economic and financial reciprocal support to cultural exchanges. Moreover, the narratives of NAM state leaders often invoked cultural emancipation as a tool against cultural, ideological and economic imperialism. "The affirmation of cultural identity, in fact, underlies the will to establish a new international economic order in which the appreciation of the values of different civilizations could contribute towards defining original models of endogenous development" (UN General Assembly 1979, 141). Thus, culture became both the *ethos* and the *logos* for affirming their state sovereignty. This was one of those areas of cooperation that celebrated and praised diversity, national specificities, ethnic and linguistic historical heterogeneity. Moreover, many states from Latin America, Africa and Asia were claiming their emancipation through cultural revolution. The harsh critique of Western imperialism and its permanent interest in meddling with their internal affairs were shaping what we have previously called the diagnostic framing. Based on that, they created new narratives, prognostic frames in which art and culture played a decisive role. Artists would no longer see Western art as an artistic reference point. On the contrary, they would search inspiration and resources in their own countries, and they would get affiliated to the foreign policy of the political regime. They would put themselves in the service of national interests and would use their art as weapons against neocolonialism, capitalism and cultural imperialism.

Secondly, the regime was encouraging artists to participate to international exhibitions, as agreed in the terms of the cultural conventions. The political leaders considered art as an incentive for motivational frames. From their perspective, artistic exchanges would strengthen the cooperation between the non-aligned states by offering each other the opportunity to express their inner self as a nation and, at the same time, to better know

their fellow members. In other words, art became the medium for frame resonance. During the '60s and '70s, the non-aligned countries were willing to taste their freedom, make political experiments, encourage cooperation, find more political allies and cultivate their friendship. The vibe of NAM was so contagious that after achieving its independence, each territory would join the movement.

Art and politics were so connected that invitations for international artists were intermediated by embassies that, in some cases, were even responsible for the selection of the artists according to the official political exigencies. The recruitment policy for the 1975 international exhibition at the Art Pavilion Slovenj Gradec, in Yugoslavia, confirms it:

as for artists from non-aligned countries, the documents reveal that the collaboration with such countries was highly encouraged on the political level. [...] gallery representatives traveled to Belgrade on two occasions to visit various embassies and try to establish political contacts to get artists interested in participating. (Hribernik and Hergold Germ 2019, 85)

In addition, the institution appointed to deal with international artistic exchanges, the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, had to prepare cultural conventions with strategic states and create programs that would promote Yugoslav artists and would present the country as an innovative and creative space for art production.

Despite the formal opposition of Yugoslavia to the Western world, the political decisions with respect to different artistic events were showing a different reality.

The Ljubljana Biennial laureates tended to be artists from Western countries [...], while artists from the Third World countries were often 'only' awarded purchase awards [...]. [...] as mentioned above, the biennial was oriented toward the West and followed the Western art canons. [...] While Yugoslav political manifestos of the time espoused the grand ideas of anti-colonialism, de-colonialism, and the struggle against cultural imperialism, the practice tended to be different. (Piškur and Merhar 2019, 173-174)

This proves that the Yugoslav regime was playing a double game and its opportunistic decisions were meant to take advantage from all possible associations, both with the Western countries and with the non-aligned world.

Southern Constellations does not only seek to provide a documentation on the artistic manifestations within the broader framework of cultural exchanges between Yugoslavia and other member state of NAM. In my opinion, it is also an expression of Yugo-nostalgia, even though on the website of the project it is stated: "The topics covered in the exhibition are not to be considered some kind of exoticism of the past, nor do they harbor nostalgia for the movement itself" (New Mappings of Europe 2019b).

There are some excerpts from the exhibition catalogue [“NAM-inspired Internationalism nevertheless had a significant force, which probably represented one of the movement’s greatest potentials, one that is largely forgotten today (page 21), “putting forward a model for a peaceful coexistence of the first, second and third worlds-if only in art and culture” (page 174)] that suggest, in my opinion, a peculiar Yugo-nostalgic feeling not necessarily related to the history of Yugoslavia as a non-aligned member, but rather to the fantasy of its potentiality.

After the dismantlement of Yugoslavia in 1991, the cultural experience of Yugo-nostalgia, “nostalgia for the fantasies associated with a country, the SFRY” (Lindstrom 2005, 233) appeared as a psycho-social remedy against the separatist movements that shredded the country. The Yugoslav state disappeared in 1991 along with its membership of NAM. Thirty years prior, in Tito’s view, the principles of brotherhood and closeness embodied in the federative configuration of the Yugoslav state were to be translated at the international level, as a regulatory principle for the NAM. *Mutatis mutandis*, NAM had a similar faith to Yugoslavia. It did not vanish, but the noble ideals of peaceful brotherhood collapsed as soon as its members started giving up their engagements and invading their fellow members. Their former comradeship became nothing more than an empty word. For this reason, the exhibition in Ljubljana can be interpreted as the expression of nostalgia for new beginnings, for the enthusiasm and richness of ideals and hopes that accompany new beginnings.

In the context of the dominant ideologies that nowadays undeniably proclaim the supremacy of the neoliberal and capitalist order, “Southern Constellations” recontextualizes the relevance of a governmental movement based on principles such as formal equality, reciprocal recognition, mutual support and solidarity in achieving independence and autonomy. Almost fifty years later after the first NAM conference, the violent interactions between some of the member states (see, e.g. the former/actual military conflicts between Iran and Iraq, India and Pakistan, the Gulf War, the Yemeni Civil War, Saudi Arabia’s military offensives against Yemen, Bahrain, Iran during the past twenty years and so on) have casted black shades over the organization. Its high hopes against neocolonialism and imperialism seem to have been replaced by civil wars and conflicts with neighboring states over ethnic, religious and territorial claims. Even though it represents the largest political organization in terms of membership after the United Nations, it’s efficiency in respect to its former goals is debatable. What the NAM seems to be missing, among others, is a trustworthy and resonant voice that could express the core common goals of the movement and seek actions based on them. Undeniably, Yugoslavia next to other states like India, Egypt, Ghana or Cuba, was one of them. The future of NAM

remains uncertain and so does the possibility of an efficient and promising leadership.

The artistic exchanges that took place between the NAM states as a result of their cultural conventions expressed their willingness to strengthen their ties within the movement, as well as their need to find new ways of expressing their identities. “Southern Constellations” attempted to recreate the peculiar enthusiasm which characterized the first decades of the movement, but at the same time it emphasized new struggles that many of its members states are still dealing with nowadays. Their peripheric geo-political and economic position in respect to the unipolar neoliberal and capitalist world maintains them in the same vulnerable situations as in the ‘60s. Refugee crises, hunger, extreme poverty, exploitation, religious, ethnic and gender discrimination, terrorism continue to threaten the life of billions of people. At least from this perspective, alternative narratives as those provided by artistic events such as this exhibition which may emphasize their struggles and needs could be the beginning of a new and truly decolonizing era.

4. Conclusions

Ever since its beginnings, NAM has provided vital support for its members, mostly newly born countries that achieved their independence after centuries of exploitation and domination. One of the states that initiated the movement was Yugoslavia, whose recent history was different from that of Latin-American or African countries. However, Tito’s actions after the end of the World War II marginalized the country and weakened its geo-political position. For Yugoslavia, as well as for most of the countries located in the southern part of the globe, NAM embodied the common struggle against imperialism, colonialism, interference of Western countries in their internal affairs. It chose a third way distinct from the political and ideological antagonism between the United States – and the Western world – and the Soviet Union – and its communist satellites.

One of the elements which undeniably contributed to the cohesion of the member states was culture and, more precisely, art. Through cultural conventions, the non-aligned countries made fruitful artistic exchanges that helped them raise their self-awareness as nations and create forums of cooperation that enforced their political commitments. The main purpose of this paper was to determine the nature and the basis of the artistic exchanges initiated by Yugoslavia with other NAM members, based on the exhibition “Southern Constellations. The Poetics of the Non-Aligned” that took place in Ljubljana in 2019. Thus, I was rather interested in the story of the cultural exchanges in the way it was narrated by this exhibition. From

this perspective, my analysis uses the literary technique of the frame narrative – a story within a story or a “Russian doll”-type story.

Nevertheless, I have read the catalogue of the exhibition from a political perspective and not an artistic one. I tried to point out that artistic exchanges initiated both by Yugoslavia and other non-aligned states had many political implications – they were commissioned by the state for political purposes. For this reason, they were relevant instruments in exerting soft power within a broader international context. Moreover, by using framing theory – as applied in social movements studies –, I highlighted the fact that cooperation between NAM states through artistic means shaped their frame resonance - core values and norms that defined both the movement and its members.

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